

Gamchas woven into labour of love

By Jamil Khan

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DUBAI: Gamcha, a thin, coarse cotton towel used by labourers from India and Bangladesh to dry the body after bathing or even as a headgear to shield heads from the scorching heat of the sun, has become a new source of inspiration for a Dubai-based US-born artist, who is showcasing her latest artwork in a month-long exhibition.

The exhibition 'The Gamcha Project,' comprising 60 artworks done by Elise Vazelakis, is presently under way at the Showcase Gallery in Dubai and will run until April 15.

Labourers from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, who commonly use this cotton towel to wipe sweat as they labour away at construction sites, procure their gamchas from grocery shops in labour camps for around Dhs5.

Elise Vazelakis, an American artist, who has been residing in Dubai for the last three years, was struck by the sight of workers adorning the Gamcha while at work. This daily sight inspired her to weave the product in a different manner so as to reflect an artwork.

Talking to The Gulf Today, she shared her story of how more than a year ago, she took weaving lessons. The purpose was to incorporate the old Gamchas — which she took from the labourers in place of new ones that she provided them — in the artworks that she then created.

"When I encountered the sight of these workers working in such hot weather and covering their faces with this colourful Gamcha, besides using it also as a towel to wipe themselves as they sweated profusely, I had an idea. I was inspired to create some artwork as a sign of showing my respect to these labourers," she said.

Her idea was to weave small pieces into a fabric, but her dismay, she was unable to find a traditional loom in Dubai to accomplish her objective. "I had to go back to Los Angeles where I learnt how to weave. I bought a new loom and came back to launch the project in Dubai. Initially, I visited many surrounding construction sites and offered the labourers new Gamchas in order to procure their used ones for incorporating into my artworks. I also used the occasion to give each of the workers a 'care package' that included some snacks and some cash, and of course, a new Gamcha," she added.

She exhibited her work — paintings and sculptures — in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles and lastly, in Dubai, some two years ago.

Vazelakis collected 60 Gamchas in addition to some construction material like nails and prints of photographs of some of the labourers to use in her artworks. She is also planning to invite a group of workers to her exhibition, especially those who offered their Gamchas.

"A portion of the sale from these artworks will be donated to the Sameness Project, an NGO working for the labourers in Dubai," she added.

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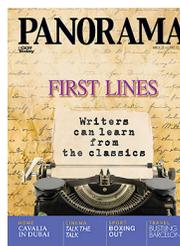
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Vazelakis tells people that the least they can do for these hardworking labourers who have made Dubai what it is today is to throw a warm smile in their direction by way of showing them some affection, she stressed.

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